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AUTHOR Harper, Wesley E.
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Liking for Evaluators as a Function of Self-Esteem

Wesley E. Harper

University of Oregon

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Presenter's address: Department of Psychology, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon 97403

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Liking for Evaluators as a Function of Self-Esteem

Abstract

The effect of self-esteem on liking for evaluators was tested by measuring the self-esteem of 64 junior college students; giving them positive, ambiguous, or negative feedback in an interview concerning how they would handle group situations; and then assessing their liking for the interviewer. Because subjects anticipated participating in a group, giving the evaluation future utility, consistency effects were predicted: Positive evaluators would elicit more liking from high esteem persons, and negative evaluators, more liking from lows. Self-esteem interacted with evaluation as predicted ($p < .01$), suggesting limits to the esteem-enhancement explanation of reactions to evaluations by others.

Presenter: Wesley E. Harper, Department of Psychology, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR 97403.

Liking for Evaluators as a Function of Self-Esteem

Two main hypotheses have been proposed to account for the effect of self-esteem on reactions to evaluation from others. The consistency position predicts that, since people respond favorably to sources that confirm their view of themselves, persons with low self-esteem will like critical evaluators and those with high self-esteem will prefer sources of praise. The esteem-enhancement position, on the other hand, predicts that all people, especially those with low self-esteem, will like positive evaluators because of a need for approval.

While the majority of studies have confirmed esteem-enhancement predictions, conclusions that this is a comprehensive explanation of the relationship between self-esteem and liking for evaluators (e.g., Mettee and Aronson, 1974) are not confirmed by all the available literature.

Factors Promoting Consistency

Three conditions have been found reliably to produce consistency effects. First, evaluations from another and from oneself both must be clear and relevant to the same trait (Regan, 1976). Second, evaluations contrary to other reliable evidence will be discounted, producing consistency effects. However, because of the social norm to speak positively of another, errors in evaluation in the positive direction will produce neutral or even positive reactions unless they seriously challenge the evaluators' competence or sincerity (Jones, 1964; Jones & Davis, 1965; Shrauger, 1975). Errors in the negative direction, however, cannot be easily dismissed and must be viewed as sincere judgments or evidence of dislike.

The third attribute producing liking for evaluators consistent with one's self-esteem is future utility (Jones & Pines, 1968; Jones & Ratner, 1967). Subjects who anticipated repeating the task which prompted the evaluation, publicly revealing their performance, or using evaluations to make a decision liked the sources of evaluations consistent with their own assessment more than inconsistent evaluators.

The present study incorporated these factors in a constructive replication of Jacobs, Berscheid, and Walster (1971), attempting to reverse the latter's esteem-enhancement results.

An Esteem-Enhancement Outcome

Jacobs et al. pitted the esteem-enhancement and consistency hypotheses together by raising or lowering the self-esteem of male college freshman through bogus personality assessments and then measuring their reaction to positive, ambiguous, or negative evaluations. Evaluation took the form of an audio recording of an anonymous female college student's opinion of their performance on a dating skills task. High (HSES) and low (LSES) self-esteem subjects liked the evaluator equally well in the positive feedback condition, but the HSES rated the evaluator more favorably in the ambiguous ($p < .001$) and negative (ns) conditions. Thus, the ambiguous condition revealed esteem-enhancement effects, and the positive and negative conditions were inconclusive. The overall pattern was consistent with an esteem-enhancement interpretation ($p = .03$).

The authors hypothesized that HSES interpreted the ambiguous feedback message more positively than LSES and were less affected by the negative feedback because they needed approval less. Neither perceived favorableness of the evaluation nor need for approval was measured directly, however.

Testing the Esteem-Enhancement Outcome

The present study replicated Jacobs et al. with modifications designed to produce liking for sources of evaluation consistent with subjects' self-esteem. The evaluation was restricted to the ability to work in task-oriented groups, which would clearly be useful in the second phase of the study, which required participation in such a group. The evaluation in Jacobs et al. was more general and less likely to clash with subjects' self-perceptions. In addition, their ambiguous evaluation was tentative, inviting discounting. Finally, their evaluation had no

immediate future utility. Because of these differences, it was predicted that, while subjects would tend to like positive evaluators more, self-esteem and evaluation would interact: HSES would like the interviewer more than LSES in the positive condition but less in the negative condition. The ambiguous evaluator would be liked somewhat more by LSES than HSES since essentially neutral feedback should appear slightly negative, particularly to HSES.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 45 female and 19 male members of junior college psychology classes who volunteered for a study on group decision making. The mean age for females was 25.8 (*SD* = 10.2) and for males, 26.7 (*SD* = 7.7). Evaluation conditions were assigned randomly within sex, yielding 15 females and six males in each condition except the positive one, which contained seven males.

Variables

Immediately after volunteering, subjects completed a specially developed five-item self-esteem scale embedded in a 10-item questionnaire. The self-esteem items concerned self-confidence with each sex, ability to speak up in a group, physical attractiveness, and overall satisfaction with self. In an independent sample of 22 male and 22 female junior college students (mean age = 25.1) this scale correlated .72 ($p < .001$) with Rosenberg's (1965) Self-Esteem Scale.

The evaluation manipulation was the interviewer's responses to three of the subject's five answers; they were either approving, ambiguous, or disapproving. The main dependent variable, liking for the interviewer, was measured by a bipolar adjective scale included in an evaluation of the interviewer obtained at the conclusion of the experiment.

Procedure

Within two weeks of volunteering, subjects reported individually to the college audiovisual studio, site of the study. The experimenter immediately introduced the

subject to an opposite sexed assistant, who "had a lot of experience working with groups," took the two to a small room, and asked the subject to answer several questions posed by the assistant before participating in a decision-making group. Two interviewers were used, both 22 years old, with brand new BA degrees in psychology. The five questions concerned the subject's response to problems in a task-oriented group, e.g., dealing with a member who dominated discussion. The manipulated evaluations came in response to answers to the first, third, and fifth questions.

After responding to the subject's last answer, the assistant called in the experimenter and departed. The experimenter asked the subject to complete a confidential evaluation of the interviewer, which contained the liking measure, and then provided debriefing.

Results

Male and female subjects did not differ in mean age, t (62) = 0.37, measured self-esteem, t (62) = 0.10, liking for the interviewer, t (62) = 0.49, or the relationship between self-esteem and liking for the interviewer, z (58) = 0.17. Therefore, data from the two sexes were combined. Random assignment produced equivalent mean self-esteem scores among treatments, F (2, 61) = 0.82, ns.

Analyses of variance of subjects' ratings of the interviewer's criticalness, F (2, 61) = 27.61, $p < .001$, and friendliness, F (2, 61) = 10.64, $p < .001$, suggest that the feedback manipulation was successful. To check for interviewer behaviors that might unintentionally affect subjects, the interviewers' smiles, nods, and proportion of time looking at the subject were reliably coded during randomly selected interviews by two independent raters. The variables did not differ significantly among treatments; Fs (2, 17) ranged from 0.11 to 1.84, all ns. There was no significant interaction between judges' ratings of subjects' physical attractiveness and interviewer behavior.

The main hypothesis, that liking for an evaluator is a function of the interaction between self-esteem and favorability of evaluation, was confirmed. To render the results directly comparable to those of Jacobs et al., self-esteem scores in each treatment were split at the median, and the liking scores for the resulting high and low esteem groups were subjected to a planned comparison (Hays, 1963). The treatment means differed significantly in the predicted pattern, $F(1, 54) = 15.8$, $p < .01$. While the low esteem group liked the positive evaluator ($M = 75.7$) more than the negative one ($M = 66.5$), they liked the ambiguous evaluator ($M = 82.3$) even more. The high esteem group demonstrated a strong positivity effect (Ms = 91.4, 82.3, and 56.7 for positive, ambiguous, and negative conditions, respectively). Thus there was a strong interaction between self-esteem and evaluation in the predicted direction.

Discussion

These finding contrast with those of Jacobs et al. Their subjects whose self-esteem had been raised liked the source of ambiguous evaluation more than subjects with lowered self-esteem ($p < .001$) and tended to like the source of negative evaluation more ($p < .10$), the opposite of the present findings. They also found self-esteem to be unrelated to liking for the positive evaluator, while the present study found a positive relationship. The present results support the consistency hypothesis: HSES tended to like the positive evaluator more than LSES, but lows tended to like the ambiguous and negative evaluator more than highs.

Findings of the present study also conflict with the hypothesis of Jacobs et al. that persons whose self-esteem had been raised perceived the ambiguous feedback more favorably than did those with lowered self-esteem. Esteem was not related to the present subjects' estimates of how much the interviewer liked them or their ratings of the interviewer's acceptingness, either overall or by conditions.

The present study produced suggestive evidence supporting Shrauger and Lund's

(1975) findings that HSES respond more differentially to contrasting evaluations than do LSES. Subjects with high esteem responded more positively to the source of favorable feedback and more negatively to the provider of ambiguous or negative feedback than did LSES. This pattern was found in liking for the interviewer and ratings of the interviewer's acceptingness, friendliness, and listener skills. Since this contrasts with a finding of Jones, Knurek, and Regan (1973), further study is warranted.

Conclusion

One interpretation of the different reactions of HSES and LSES to evaluation found in this study is that LSES find praise or success less pleasing than do HSES because it puts pressure on them to perform well in the future--more precisely, to perform better than they think they can. Several studies support this conclusion (Brickman, Linsenmeier, and McCareins, 1976; Fitch, 1970; Maracek & Mettee, 1972).

This suggests that a therapy that produces rapid behavior change in clients with low self-esteem may breed its own demise by increasing their anxiety to the point where they discontinue therapy or lapse into less threatening patterns of failure or passivity. The liking data suggest that for such persons reinforcement from the therapist may not build rapport and may even threaten it.

Interpersonally, in conditions which produce consistency effects low self-esteem people may gravitate toward friends who give them ambiguous or even negative, as opposed to positive, feedback (Deutsch & Solomon, 1959; Dutton, 1972; Dutton & Arrowood, 1971; Jones, 1973; Jones & Ratner, 1967). Thus, low self-esteem people may immesh themselves in a net of social relationships which encourages their low self-esteem, creating a vicious circle. Negative self-verbalizations may serve to keep this net intact by discouraging positive reinforcement or driving potential positive reinforcers away.

Theoretically, this study affirms that the esteem-enhancement view of the

relationship between self-esteem and liking for an evaluator is not universally applicable but must yield to consistency when the evaluation has future utility. This suggests that LSES value criticism for the information it provides; HSES, convinced that they will do well, would rather hear praise. This hypothesis should be explored by testing whether increasing the information content of negative feedback increases consistency effects. Conversely, increasing the informative value of positive evaluation, a more difficult task, should diminish consistency effects. Such studies may clarify the interaction of self-esteem and the content, valence, and task relevance of evaluations, making possible correct prediction of both esteem-enhancement and consistency relationships between self-esteem and reactions to evaluation by others.

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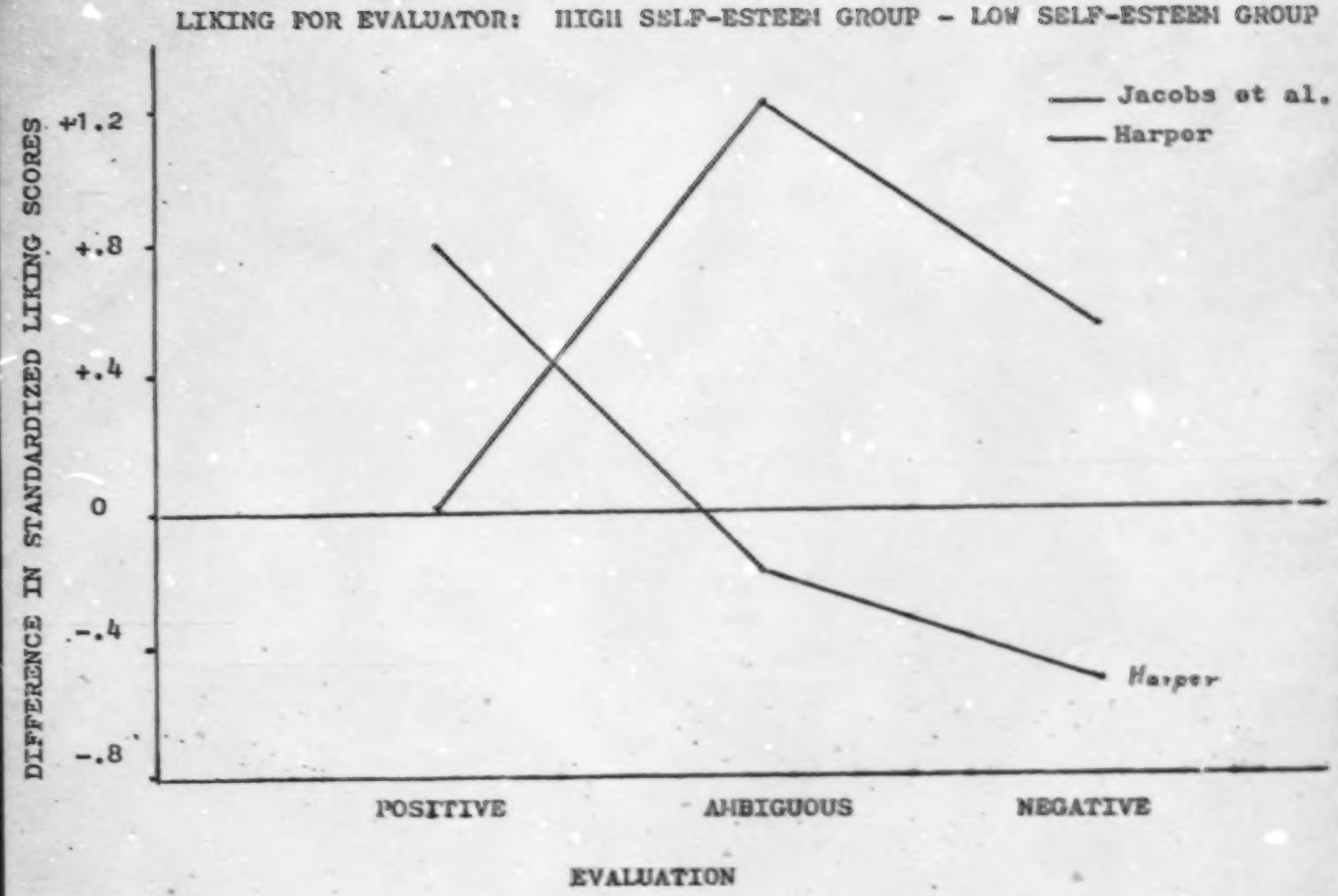
LIKING FOR EVALUATOR: HIGH SELF-ESTEEM GROUP - LOW SELF-ESTEEM GROUP
Jacobs et al.
Harper
DIFFERENCE IN STANDARDIZED LIKING SCORES
+1.2
+.8
+.4
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-.4
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Harper
POSITIVE
AMBIGUOUS
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